

„Siamo nelle mani di Dio“: From friend to foe. Former Italian soldiers in the Albanian resistance after September 1943 and their struggle with the German forces.

Të dashur zonja dhe zotërinj! Është kënaqësi për mua që sot jam këtu. Unë nuk flas mirë shqip, prandaj prezentimin tim do ta mbaj në anglisht

Introduction

Following the invasion in Albania in April 1939, Italy stationed a maximum of eight divisions in Albania. It was the temporary endpoint of an evolution that started shortly after World War I, when Albania, step by step, became dependent on Fascist Italy. In the second half of the 1920s, under King Ahmed Zogu the Albanian dependence on Italy grew even stronger and the country became the basis of Mussolini's expansionist efforts in Southeast Europe. A good example for the increasing Italian influence in the economic sector is the multitude of diverse Italian companies settling in Albania since the 1920s.

Between April 1939 and autumn 1943 Albania became part of a future Italian Imperial System and was thought of as a colony through the settlement of about 300,000 Italians in Albania. The policy of "Italianisation", fascistisation of printmedia, creation of fascist leisure time organisations etc., and the instrumentalisation of the Kosovo-question evidentially bore the hallmarks of governor Francesco Jacomoni and Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano.

Furthermore, the fusion of the Italian and the Albanian Army became a reality in summer 1939. Only four months after the invasion in August 1939, the „Milizia Fascista Albanese“ was founded as a branch of the "Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale", better known as the infamous "Camicie Nere". In the campaign against Greece in late 1940 this formation was already on duty.

The conduct of the Italian regular military and Black shirts in Albania was particularly cruel. This evidently contrasts the frequently used stereotypes of cruel German forces and featherbrained, less brutal Italian soldiers. They committed a plenitude of atrocities against the Albanian and the neighbouring Montenegrin, Greek, Macedonian and Kosovar population. In summer 1941, Ciano noted in his diary that one of Mussolini's most favoured generals – probably general Alessandro Pirzio Biroli – encouraged his soldiers in Albania to shun their previously imposed limits of violence, "I have heard that you are good family men. That's very well at home, but not here. Here, you will never go too far in being thieves, murderers, and rapists." Similarly, brutal measures were taken by Italian generals against Montenegrin resisters in the bordering territories

to Albania in autumn 1941 as confirmed by the German diplomat Peter Pfeiffer “In fact, after the suppression of the riots plenty of leeway was given to the Italian soldiers to loot and rape for five days. In Skutari [Shkodër] many captured Montenegrins have been shot by martial law.”

The Italian Capitulation in September 1943

On 8 September 1943 the Italian state surrendered. The Italian forces in Albania hadn't been informed by then. As Lieutenant Nazzareno Garat Crema later reported they heard the bad news on the radio: “Dalla radio di Londra prima e dalla radio italiana poi, la sera dell' 8 settembre si venne a conoscenza dell'armistizio.” Even the two generals in charge, the supreme commanders of the 6th and the 9th Italian army, General Ezio Rosi and General Lorenzo Dalmazzo were not informed about the capitulation and thus gave no orders.

Chaos ensued. At the time of the surrender, about 100'000 Italians were deployed in Albania. They crowded the streets and squares – completely abandoned, - without any further orders. In the harbours they waited in vain to be returned to Italy. Diverse German testimonies illustrate a desperate situation of Italian soldiers who strayed through the streets of Tirana and other Albanian cities, without plan nor aim – now hunted by the former allies and the once suppressed Albanian population.

The hesitation and indecision of general Dalmazzo and Rosi led to the capture of four of the six Italian divisions still deployed in Albania (Parma, Puglie, Brennero e Arezzo) by the Germans. Meanwhile, the 151st Infantry Division “Perugia” and the 41st Infantry Division “Firenze” defected to the partisans.

Hunted by the Germans

When Italy and Germany became neighbouring occupation powers after the German campaign against Yugoslavia, they started to intrigue, quarrelled on the demarcation line, and accused each other of supporting diverse resistance groups. After the capitulation, German and Italian relations deteriorated even more. Now, the Italian soldiers became fair game. Not only Albanians chased them, also German soldiers of the Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht pursued their former allies. After his return to Italy, Lieutenant Moncalvo described the changing situation in Albania with the following words: “Da alleati ad aperti nemici. Ora i tedeschi [hanno] gettato la maschera.”

Many Italian soldiers tried to find cover in cities, towns, and villages, or sought work as farm hands. Once uncovered, they were often shot immediately by the German troops. Some of them became mentally disturbed as a result of the perennial hiding; like Luigi Pastore who was in hiding for an entire year before he made it home. Of the Italian troops which were led into the mountains, respectively to the partisans by their officers, some 7'000 soldiers handed themselves over to the Germans. But they were detailed to forced labour, though, regardless of their request to be recruited into the German army. Even die-hard Italian fascist troops like the "Black Shirts" were deported by the Germans, ignoring their wish to be incorporated into the Waffen-SS.

Of the six Italian divisions which were deployed in Albania about 90'000 Italian soldiers were disarmed by German soldiers or Albanians. These POWs were interned and later deported to Germany for forced labour. Some were lucky and were secretly returned to Italy by the British. The captives were forcibly marched the entire way to far distant camps like Prilep in Bulgaria where they were sent to various concentration camps. Some of the interrogated Italian soldiers testified that the disarmed soldiers were all undernourished as a consequence of receiving no food or only 100 grams of bread a day. The nutritional and accommodation situation became so critical that the commissioner of the Italian Republican Fascist Party in Albania registered that such a nutrition would be insufficient for the claimed works. Clothing was miserable and shoes lacked completely, thus the Italian prisoners had to walk barefoot even when it snowed. During their prisoners' march, they witnessed German soldiers of the Waffen-SS or Wehrmacht who burnt entire villages down without any reason. Near Valona/Vlorë, a majority of officers as well as some low ranking individuals were ordered to be shot by German soldiers of Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS. A summary of reports of the soldiers D'Ulivo, Fabbri, Sacchelli, Santi and De Vita documented "in Valona many Italian officers were butchered by the Germans. Every Italian officer even if unarmed had been shot immediately by the Germans when found." Another source tells us: "The Germans gradually advanced, killing everyone they found, mercilessly and indiscriminately." Other massacres of Italian soldiers took place in the region of Cermenica where the Italian officer Emilio Gamucci was shot together with over a hundred Carabinieri.

These documents I found in diverse European archives illuminate the radical break in the status and everyday life of those Italian soldiers who fought in Albania from 1939 to 1943. The rapid change from one day being the hunter and the next day being the

hunted presented a critical challenge for deciding the next course of action: Some of the Italians tried to catch a boat – generally from Korfu to reach the Italian homeland. Others requested to be recruited by the Germans, as already mentioned. This often led to the execution or deportation of the Italian soldiers. A third part tried to hide with families in villages, towns and cities or hoped to disguise themselves as day labourers on Albanian farms. A last group chose a radical way; they refused to capitulate and to ground their arms.

Looking for the Albanian Resistance

According to various sources, the estimated number of former members of the Italian army, who stayed, hid, or fought in Albania is approximately 30'000. As they were stuck in Albania, joining the resistance was the best way to survive the last two years of war. However, as reports document, this struggle was not only a war against Nazi Germany, but a true civil war, „una guerra civile“ which was going on in Albania and the bordering territories, as interrogated Italian soldiers stated; for example Lamberto Francesconi and Roberto, “The shootings for retribution have already started, instigated by the chiefs of war bands, and a downright civil war is foreseeable when, one day, the Germans are gone and Albania won’t have a strong ruling hand.”

It seems, the various partisan formations saw the Italian soldiers as a welcome boost for their troops. An Italian soldier mentioned: “The rebels had very kindly granted the cooperation with the Italians.” These diverse partisan units, from Communist to Nationalist and Royalist, even helped their former enemies to escape from the German concentration camps, as the soldier Guido Tecchi stated “All parties helped in every way those Italian soldiers who escaped from the German concentration camps.”

Well, not every destination is known: The major part of Italians joined the National Liberation Front; some figures and destinations are recorded; 2000 reached the band of Myslim Peza, a known Albanian resister; others joined to the band of Axi Lezi. They went “alla macchia con i vari partiti”. German sources estimated that approximately 30'000 members of the Italian army who joined the Albanian resistance (this number might be exaggerated).

The soldier Guido Tecchi who has been interrogated after his return to Italy stated that the “Firenze” in the region of Kruja refused to surrender their arms, retreated to the mountains and continued to fight. Still under the command of general Arnaldo Azzi, the division returned to Burreli, then to Kruja. The division initially fought together with

remnants of the „Arezzo“ division. When they became aware that the German forces were too strong, Azzi contacted the National Liberation Front and the “Firenze” defected entirely to the Albanian Communist Partisans. Formally it was disbanded and rebuilt as “Comando Italiano Truppe alla Montagna“. The units went back to the line Qafa e Shtames/Debar and fought in this region between Middle Albania and Macedonia. As the sources show, General Gino Piccini, the interim commander of the division became a very important connection for the Italian army in the liberated territory of the homeland. Obviously, he stayed in Albania even after the war. I examined his final reports from the date 7 July 1945.

Conclusion and Further remarks

I come to my conclusion: As we have seen the former Italian soldiers were hunted, killed or deported by their former allies, the Germans. One question remains: Would these parts still have joined the Albanian resistance, even when the German Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS would have accepted and incorporated them in their units? After the war, the fate of such units as the “Divisione Firenze” helped to create the myth of a resisting and anti-Nazi Italy. Especially the battalion “Antonio Gramsci” - best known today - has been instrumentalised and exploited to establish a narrative of an overall resisting Italy. On the other hand, we must notice that these italians who remained in Albania after the 8 September 1943 and fought in partisan units were convinced to contribute to the liberation of Italy – and also did.

Thank you for your attention!